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The Study of Christian Culture: A New Approach to General Education

JOHN P. GLEASON

FEW persons are without opinions on the subject of education in the nuclear era, but rarely does anyone bring to a discussion of the problems of contemporary education such a wealth of erudition and historical insight as the distinguished British scholar Christopher Dawson.[1] It was therefore an event of considerable interest when Mr. Dawson began, some five years ago, to outline his ideas on "Education and Christian Culture." What he proposed, briefly, was the study of Christian culture as the basis for an integrative undergraduate curriculum, similar to such projects in general education as Columbia University's Introduction to Western Civilization, but having particular relevance for believing Christians.

Noting that the decline of classical humanism has led to an education which is at the same time too detailed and too superficial, and that the average undergraduate curriculum has become "a sprawling collection of unrelated units," Dawson has argued for the replacement of the traditional liberal arts with a new integrating core built around the study of Christian culture. Dawson has consistently held that religion is the vital, formative element in any higher culture; many of his published works illumine the dynamic, crucial role of Christianity in the development of Western culture.

Christian culture as he conceives it is the external expression or embodiment of Christianity in social institutions and patterns of thought and behavior. The educational approach he suggests would examine the interaction of Christianity with the development of Western civilization in "a study of the culture process itself from its spiritual and theological roots, through its organic historical growth to its cultural fruits." This study of the "historical reality of Christianity as a living force which entered into the lives of men and society and changed them" would not only offer a unique insight into the modern situation of Western civilization, but it would also provide a unified framework, a solid context of understanding, into which more specialized knowledge could easily be fitted.

Dawson's proposals stimulated considerable discussion: a number of articles appeared supporting or criticizing the plan, and it was made the theme of the Conference of Deans of Catholic Liberal Arts Colleges held at the University of Notre Dame in the spring of 1955. This discussion not only brought the problems of such a program into focus and helped to clarify the concept of Christian culture but it also made clear that the merits of the plan—as well as objections to its "vagueness," its being too ambitious and unwieldy—could only be proved or disproved by a trial.

Only Saint Mary's College, Notre Dame, Indiana, has so far attempted to put Dawson's ideas to the test of action. Here, under the leadership of Sister M. Madeleva, the president of Saint Mary's (whose courageous venture into the new curricular experiment was commended by Mr. Dawson), and with Dr. Bruno P.

[1] Mr. Dawson is now Chauncey Stillman Professor of Catholic Theological Studies at Harvard University.

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Schlesinger of Saint Mary's faculty as chairman, a Program for Christian Culture was launched in the fall of 1956.

Much of the criticism of Dawson's original proposal dealt with the practical difficulties of putting such a program into action. Cognizant of the problems involved, but not overawed by them, Saint Mary's began its program on a modest scale, organizing it as an elective interdepartmental major, rather than as a full four-year core curriculum. The students who choose to major in Christian Culture have already completed two years of standard liberal arts work and are prepared by basic courses in theology, philosophy, literature, and history.

The work of the program itself covers the junior and senior years and includes twenty-eight semester hours of classes. Although Christian Culture is a separate department in the college, it draws on members of the other departments for instruction, and duplication of courses is avoided. In accordance with Dawson's proposals, the Saint Mary's program follows a historical-sociological approach. It stresses the genetic study of institutions and trends of thought, with close examination of certain crucial periods, rather than attempting to make the student master all the factual details of Western development since the birth of Christ.

Since its purpose is to explore the complex interaction of the Christian religion and the evolution of Western culture, the program emphasizes the common elements and unity of that culture rather than tracing the particularities of national development.

A four-semester sequence of historically oriented classes forms the core of the program. In the junior year the student examines the formative stages of Christian culture in the course called The Making of Europe, while Medieval Christendom deals with its period of maturity. In the senior year the historical sequence continues with courses on The Age of Religious Division and The Age of Revolutions and World Wars.

By giving equal attention to the growth of Christian culture through the Middle Ages and its weakening and dissolution since the Renaissance, the program provides a sharper perspective for understanding the contemporary situation, but avoids bogging down in the nostalgic "Mass and Maypole" type of medievalism which some of Dawson's critics feared his proposal would involve. Nor is the student likely to develop a narrow sectarian ideology, or to become intolerant of anything outside the immediate tradition of Christian culture, after seeing the remarkable variety and assimilative power of that tradition and after weighing the positive contributions as well as the secularizing effects of Western development since the Renaissance.

Since the program is designed to provide general education rather than to produce specialized scholars, and since it is obviously impossible to deal exhaustively with such a vast range of material, the chairman has organized the courses on the basis of selectivity, with intensive study of key periods, instead of attempting to offer encyclopedic coverage. A corresponding effort is being made to avoid the conventional textbook with its almost cosmic inclusiveness and its dry factuality.

Specific reading assignments are given instead from works of synthesis which rest on a sound basis of critical scholarship. Examples of such books, many of which are in paperback editions, are Dawson's *The Making of Europe,* Huizinga's *The Waning of the Middle Ages,* Hazard's *The European Mind,* and H. Richard Niebuhr's *The Social Sources of Denominationalism.*

Concurrently with the historical sequence, there are four semesters of colloquium sessions in which the student

makes firsthand acquaintance with many of the major achievements of Christian culture in the areas of literature and art, spiritual writing, and social thought. These discussions are coordinated with the history courses and, wherever possible, synchronized with them. *The City of God*, for example, is read and discussed when the fall of Rome is treated in the historical sequence, and St. Thomas More's *Utopia* is taken up at the same time as the study of Renaissance humanism. This method fixes each work solidly in its historical context, rather than presenting it to the student as an isolated monument divorced from its cultural background. The chairman of the program is present and participates in these discussions to preserve the desired unity of theme and treatment, but a specialist in the area of the work under consideration leads the discussion. As with the historical courses, the discussions come down to the present age, including in the final year readings from Newman, Kierkegaard, and T. S. Eliot.

Besides the appropriate classes in the historical sequence and the colloquium series, the student takes each semester a more intensive course in some especially pertinent aspect of Western development. From the almost innumerable possibilities for such courses, Saint Mary's has selected Early Christian Writers and History of Christian Philosophy for the first year of its program, and Church, State, and Society and Christianity and American Culture for the second. This choice of subjects, and particularly the fact that the program focuses on the American situation in its final semester, indicates the care which has been taken to make Christian culture significant to the student in terms of her own experience.

The Lilly Endowment of Indianapolis, Indiana, became interested in Saint Mary's Program for Christian Culture, and has greatly strengthened it by a generous grant. Funds from this grant have made it possible to institute at Saint Mary's a series of lectures on topics related to the tradition of Christian culture. Some outstanding scholars have contributed to the program through these Lilly Endowment Lectures. In 1957–58, to cite but a few examples, Professor Francis Fergusson discussed Dante, Professor Ewart Lewis treated the significance of medieval political thought, and Dr. Karl Stern lectured on the spiritual aspects of psychotherapy. A series of equally high quality has been arranged for the current academic year.

Saint Mary's two-year experience in trying to put into practice Dawson's proposals for the study of Christian culture is, of course, too scanty to allow much drawing of conclusions, but the response of the students has been encouraging. The program is attracting students of very high quality; almost half of the first group of girls to complete the course were honor students. They have found that the novelty of the approach has enriched their understanding not only of Western culture, but of the religion which has played so important a role in informing that culture.

The better students particularly appreciate the relief the program offers from stultifying textbooks, and many have remarked on the unexpected delight they experienced in reading authors they had previously known only by allusion or footnote. And to have elevated St. Jerome or John Winthrop above the status of an *ibid.* is some accomplishment.

If the program has awakened in the student an appreciation of the richness of her heritage, and has introduced her to the excellence and contemporary significance of forgotten works, then it has achieved one of its purposes. But the most encouraging reaction has been that many of the girls report that they can organize their knowledge better in their own minds; it all seems to fit together

better, to fall into place and become part of a comprehensive unity, a large and intelligible pattern. There is no reason to suppose that this ability to fit discrete facts and events into a total framework of understanding will desert them completely upon graduation.

Saint Mary's does not pretend that its Program for Christian Culture has solved all the problems of the Catholic college, or even that this program has explored all the possibilities of Christopher Dawson's proposals. Saint Mary's experience does indicate, however, that Dawson's suggestions are by no means impracticable and that they deserve further validation, especially from Catholic educators currently disturbed over the intellectual life of the Catholic Church in America. But the heritage of the Christian past is not an exclusive possession of Catholics; the study of Christian culture deserves the attention of all who are concerned with the problems of Christian education.